

# The Press DEMOCRAT

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## Three in Sonoma County top commuter-friendly list

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Free bus passes and prime parking spots don't exactly spring to mind as the ideal job perks a company can provide.

But at Amy's Kitchen, they're a pretty hot commodity.

The Santa Rosa frozen food company, along with dozens of other Sonoma County employers, provides the city bus passes and parking spots as incentives for workers to carpool or find other means of getting to work.

The goal is to reduce air pollution and traffic congestion by getting more cars off the streets, said Cindy Gillespie, director of human resources at Amy's Kitchen, which is located in a busy hub off Northpoint Parkway in western Santa Rosa.

It's also keeping employees happy, she said. Between 50 and 100 of the 600 employees at Amy's Kitchen ask for the bus passes every month, and the four parking spots reserved for carpools are full during every shift.

"We've just been really conscious about trying to do everything we can to control traffic," Gillespie said. "I think the bus pass definitely, that's a really great perk. And the parking places are really hot right now."

For its efforts at encouraging employees to use alternative transportation, Amy's Kitchen was one of three Sonoma County employers picked by a Bay Area environmental and business coalition as among the best for commuters. Agilent Technologies and the City of Santa Rosa also made the list.

The Bay Area's Best Workplaces for Commuters Coalition — which includes the federal Environmental Protection Agency and several transportation agencies and business

groups like the Bay Area Council and the Silicon Valley Manufacturing Group — released its first-ever list of 84 employers that provide incentives to help workers avoid driving.

The coalition hopes to draw attention to companies that have developed creative ways to encourage alternative transportation in the hopes more companies and the people who work for them will do the same.

According to recent Census figures, 75 percent of Sonoma County workers drive alone to work. In the Bay Area, only Santa Clara County had a higher percentage of solo commuters.

The City of Santa Rosa joined the list in part for its program that offers incentives to employers and commuters to leave their cars at home. About 1,800 people have signed up for the 6-year-old program that gives employees of Santa Rosa-based companies prizes like free movie tickets if they carpool or use alternative transportation at least eight days a month.

"It's about air quality," said Joan Moulthrop, the city's transportation systems management coordinator, who runs the incentive program. "That is the goal, to reduce air pollutants."

She said that participants in the incentive program cut back 7,800 car trips in October by carpooling, taking the bus or walking or biking to work. And with the new carpool lanes on Highway 101, she's seen interest in the program spike in the past month.

At Agilent Technologies, Sonoma County's largest private employer with 3,600 employees working at facilities in Santa Rosa and Rohnert Park, about 60 people participate in the city program, said spokesman Jeff Weber.

Other company incentives range from 135 convenient parking spaces for carpools to showers for employees who bike to work.

Agilent also provides a shuttle service between its Fountaingrove and Rohnert Park facilities so employees won't have to drive themselves to meetings, and workers who carpool have access to the emergency ride program, which guarantees them a free taxi ride home if they suddenly have to leave work.

"For me, I carpool because of sustainability and environmental matters," said Petaluma resident Claire McCarthy, who carpools to her job at Agilent about twice a week. "Anything I can do to lower greenhouse gas emissions I will try and do. Besides, the days when I don't carpool, I'm stuck just watching all these other cars whiz by me in the carpool lane."

Weber said almost all of Agilent's carpool spots are taken every day. And while he couldn't say exactly how many employees use bicycles to commute, biker Louis Salz said about 20 to 30 coworkers regularly peddle to work.

Salz, a research and development engineer, has been riding his bike nearly every day for the 22 years he's worked at Agilent.

It takes him 25 minutes to ride the 5 miles to work — including a famously strenuous climb up Fountaingrove Parkway. Once he gets there, Salz hits the locker room for a quick shower and changes into fresh clothes.

"It keeps me in shape. I find I feel better, more alert," Salz said. "And it saves money. The single biggest expense most of us have outside of our homes is our cars."

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